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Well

Tara Parker-Pope on Health

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## Really? The Claim: Pets Can Raise a Child's Risk of Developing Allergies

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### THE FACTS

Many parents worry that keeping a dog or cat in the house may make a child more likely to develop [pet allergies](#). But the scientific evidence suggests otherwise.

Instead, Fido and Whiskers seem to have the reverse effect. Most studies now show that children who are exposed to a pet during their first year have a lower likelihood of developing dog or cat allergies later on in life.

In [the latest study](#), appearing this month in the journal Clinical & Experimental Allergy, researchers at the Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit followed 566 boys and girls from birth until age 18, regularly collecting data from the children's families about exposure to indoor pets. At the end of the study, the researchers took blood samples and tested the subjects for their allergic sensitization to dogs and cats.

The children who had shared a home with a cat in their first year of life were about half as likely to be allergic to cats as those who had not. A decreased risk also was found in boys who lived with a dog as infants, though for some reason the effect was not as strong in girls.

The researchers also concluded that exposure at later ages did not make much of a difference — it was exposure in infancy that mattered. “The first year of life is the critical period during childhood when indoor exposure to dogs or cats influences sensitization to these animals,” the study's authors concluded.

Another study published in The Journal of the American Medical Association in 2002 documented a similar pattern: [Children exposed to two or more dogs or cats in the first year of life were less likely to develop allergies](#) to dust mites, ragweed and dog and cat hair.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

Research suggests that exposure to a dog or cat in the first year of life can reduce the risk of allergies to them.